Newspapers by ancestry
https://www.newspapers.com/image/578877970



Downloaded on Mar 25, 2024



Music

# HEY, GUYS! IT'S JUST ROCK & ROLL!

Illustration by Wenden Baldwin

## A Tirade Against The Excesses Of Rock Criticism

by Gene Sculatti and Davin Seay

There's good rock & roll, and there's bad rock & roll. Rock criticism, however, attempts to bypass this simple fact. Somehow, when it comes to writing about rock, the balance gets shook up, the scale is tipped overwhelmingly toward the pompous, the self-serving and the brazenly irresponsible. Fifteen years after the invention of rock criticism, hyperbole and pedantic rants have long since exceeded allowable safety limits.

A recent *Rolling Stone* review found one British post-punk LP "nothing less than a surpassing testament to the life force itself." A local critic experienced an album as "one of those strange and rare moments when art and experience merged" and found it enabled him to "gaze intently and unblinkingly into the hellhole of a tortured and hopeless existence." Another equated the music of Public Image with 19th-century French dandyism, Dada and one of Stendahl's most obtuse novels. Veteran rock critic Dave Marsh says, amazingly, "I never thought rock & roll was fun. I thought it was hard work, triumph and failure." All this about a music that once had nothing more (or less) to proclaim than "Wopbopalubopawopbamboom."

It all started innocently enough in 1966, when a gaggle of college rock aficionados decided to start writing about their favorite subject. Richard Goldstein was there in the *Village Voice*. Paul Williams, Sandy Pearlman and Richard Meltzer were there in *Crawdaddy*. In San Francisco, Greg Shaw poured his zeal into the *Mojo-Navigator Rock & Roll News*. And it seemed like a good idea — good writers with something to say, looking for a place to say it outside the teen mags (who'd previously been the only publications to even discuss the subject). All of these critics wrote to the point, with minimal pretense and boundless enthusiasm. Contents of a typical *Crawdaddy* (January 1967): "The Uses of Raga in Rock," a history of doo-wop, reviews of the Animals, Jefferson Airplane and the Supremes.

The Supremes! There it is, right there on page 19, in Daniel Gannon's own words! The Supremes' single "You Keep me Hangin' On" "draws more inspiration from Prokofiev than from earlier Motown." The spoken line at the end of the second verse "borders on a vocal style used by Arnold Schoenberg in *Pierrot Lunaire*, in which a soprano speaks the text, following in exaggerated high and low pitches on a printed line of music."

Prokofiev!? Schoenberg!? *Pierrot Lunaire?* What about Holland-Dozier-Holland, Berry Gordy and "don't forget the Motor City?" All of a sudden, according to Daniel Gannon and like-minded fellow travelers, rock was coming of age. By 1967, Frisco was incubating mystics, Cream was fusing jazz and blues ions into Heavy Metal and the Beatles were in the studio concocting the grandest experiment of all. Rock was getting Serious, and you didn't have to be a social linguist, historian or Ph.D. candidate to know it. But it sure helped.

By the time *Sergeant Pepper* was released (June 1967), the critics were more than ready. *Newsweek* hailed the Beatles as Britain's new poet laureates. They were effortlessly compared to Tennyson, Dame Edith Sitwell, playwright John Osborne and Wordsworth. They equaled Chaplin, Donald Barthelme and Harold Pinter. They even met T.S. Eliot face to face; Lennon's "A Day in the Life" was nothing less than "the Beatles' 'Wasteland.' "

The race to profundity was on. Nothing could stop it. Critical dissections of rock sprang from the unlikeliest places: *Time*, *Esquire* (where Robert Christgau inaugurated his "Secular Music Column"); every Middlesex hamlet had its resident pop pundit.

Naturally, some writers stuck to the essentials and wrote sensibly in early *Rolling Stone* and elsewhere. But more and more were concurring with Patti Smith that "rock & roll is the highest and most universal form of expression since the lost tongue."

It's been downhill ever since. Which wouldn't be so bad if such elevated notions hadn't seeped, like noxious agents, into the consciousness of those who were making the music. While most critics justifiably distance themselves from Styx, Rush, Supertramp and the worst excesses of "art rock," the fact remains that in their quest for Significance in Rock the critics sired just such horrific offspring. The question of which came first — pretentious musicians or self-aggrandizing critics, is academic. They both feed from the same trough. And for their part, audiences too were content to swallow it all.

* * *

*"I believe rock can do anything. It's the ultimate vehicle for everything. It's the ultimate vehicle for saying anything, for putting down anything, for building up anything, for killing and creating..."*

Pete Townshend
*Rolling Stone*, 1970

By the early '70s, something was rotten in rock. The doctrine of progressivism — which most critics, audiences and musicians had so thoroughly endorsed — had soured. *Rolling Stone's Illustrated History* nailed it: "By the early '70s ... the heavy metal and art-rock hybrids had become monstrous, breeding debilitating self-consciousness, artiness for artiness' sake..."

No argument there. Fortunately, like the cavalry, Springsteen and then Punk arrived in the nick of time. Their stated intention: to finish off the bloated corpse of progressivism and restore rock to its state of natural innocence. At last! Neo-classicism! Rock gets short, simple, direct again. Roll over Emerson and tell Wakeman the news: no more 20-minute solos! No more rock operas! Like the halcyon early '60s, it will be one glorious sock hop, a teenage high from here to eternity.

Unfortunatey, that left all those Marshes, Marcuses and Landaus a little ... puzzled. If rock wasn't poetry or the absolutely visionary "democratic art" (Marcus), then what, precisely, was it?

Why, rock was "rock!" Herein lies the single most insidious postulate yet devised by the critical establishment. Like a rose is a rose, rock is rock. Leaping back over the charred remains of the progressive experiment, the critics went looking for rock — what it had been and what it, ideally, should be — and guess what? They found it. They were so proud of themselves that not only did they find it, they enshrined it. Rock became a religion. Springsteen's ratty leather jacket (not to mention Lynott's, Strummer's, Petty's, Patti's and Chryssie's) was not simply foul weather gear. It was the priestly garb of an unbroken line of prophets — Presley, Vincent, Lennon in Hamburg! "I have *seen* the future of rock & roll!" screamed Jon Landau with the parched tongue of John the Baptist. The vision!

Now that rock had been certified as the true faith, scripture required codification. (Witness rock's windy odes to itself: the Who's "Guitar & Pen," Garland Jeffreys' "R.O.C.K.," Jim Steinman's "Love and Death and an American Guitar.") Rock & roll became the covenant-bearer of all things virtuous: truth, integrity, moral rectitude. To some, it was now the highest expression of man's nobility on the whole blinking planet. "To me, rock & roll was always the function of a certain kind of idealism," Dave Marsh told *College Media Journal* with utter aplomb. "That idealism is important because that's what I base my whole philosophy on."

Really? The moment was here: the lumbering critical apparatus so painstakingly constructed could now be harnassed like some infernal Killdozer. Now that rock was rock, it could illuminate the whole pulsating spectrum of human experience. Rock en excelsis!

Even punk, that heaven-sent pretense-slayer, signified something more than a hyperkinetic hormonal workout. Once the knotty Ramones problem was solved (it was easier to read meaning into the lyrics of "Pretty Vacant" than "Lobotomy"), P-rock could proceed with the serious work the press elite knew it was destined for. Politics: the Clash's "uncompromising" leftist manifestos, Gang of Four's ground-breaking "political dance music." Ethics: Rotten's challenge to society to confront "its moral horror, its self-impelled violation, its social homicide" (Mikal Gilmore, *Rolling Stone*). The Human Condition: X's "music of impeccable symbolism, rooted in the most interesting paradox that exists in rock these days: an ebullient art whose subject matter is abject despair" (Ken Tucker, *Musician*).

'Zounds! Another victory for the crits! They've solved the crisis of modern education! Stuffy classrooms got you down? Too much trouble checking cumbersome volumes out of the library? Proust, Artaud and Marx too weighty? No problem. Everything you ever needed to know about *anything* can now be obtained from 12-inch slabs of pvc. (Even the absolute apex of 20th-century American literature was within grasp once one realized, as Greil Marcus and Paul Nelson did, that Raymond Chandler's illegitimate son was now walking around under the name Warren Zevon.)

How simple. Enlightenment on a platter. Cooked daily by rock musicians and brought by critics, steaming, to your table!

But if the taste is familiar don't be surprised. Beneath all the saucy verbiage, it could be the same old pasta. This week's Clash might just be leftover Country Joe & the Fish; PiL reheated Pink Floyd; and X — why, they're the good ol' Grateful Dead!

Hey, guys, lighten up. Rock & roll is here to stay. It doesn't need to be legitimized, sanctified or Sanforized. You don't have to "tell a stranger about rock and roll." They already know.■

Copyright © 2024 Newspapers.com. All Rights Reserved.
Powered by Newspapers.com